

**THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD: THE  
PEACE PROCESS IN MINDANAO,  
PHILIPPINES**

**Graham K Brown**

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**THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD: THE PEACE  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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### **THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD: THE PEACE PROCESS IN MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES**

This paper examines the peace process in Mindanao, Philippines, situating it within broader national and international political economies. The paper argues that the root causes of the conflict can be found in the long-term processes of state formation and capital penetration in the region which have resulted in the displacement and marginalization of the indigenous groups of Mindanao under consecutive Spanish, American, and independent Philippines control. Examining the peace process within this context, it mainstream approaches to peace processes that focus on particular “actors” (e.g. spoilers, third party interventions) and “technologies” (e.g. commitment mechanisms) provide some insights into the failure to achieve a lasting peace in the region, but that a full explanation requires consideration this structural contexts. Formal peace processes are often embedded within wider developmental programmes and the tensions and interactions within this broader dynamic are important to understand. In Mindanao, while the formal peace process has moved towards explicitly addressing root concerns of the local population, the wider “peace through development” package promoted by the international community is, in fact, exacerbating many of the economic tensions behind the conflict.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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## **THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD: THE PEACE PROCESS IN MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines the peace process in Mindanao, Philippines, situating it within broader national and international political economies. The predominantly Muslim ethnic groups (the “Moro”) that are indigenous to Mindanao and the neighbouring Sulu archipelago have long been in conflict with a succession of administrations in Manila: first successfully resisting Spanish colonial attempts to penetrate the region; then, unsuccessfully resisting American pacification and finally, after twenty-five years of Philippine independence, taking on the form of an explicitly separatist struggle that has waxed and waned in intensity since the early 1970s. The conflict was intense for around four years between 1972 and 1976, claiming at least 100,000 lives with considerably more displacement. While the level of casualties dropped drastically after the 1976 Tripoli agreement (discussed below)—and, indeed, many quantitative analysis regard the conflict as “resolved” (e.g. Hartzell, Hoddie, and Rothchild, 2001)—the region remains bedevilled by separatist and other forms of violence, and a lasting peace agreement has proved elusive.

The paper argues that the root causes of the contemporary conflict, and the obstacles to its settlement, can be found in the long-term processes of state formation and capital penetration in the region which have resulted in the displacement and marginalization of the indigenous groups of Mindanao under consecutive Spanish, American, and independent Philippines control. Examining the peace process within this context, it argues that mainstream approaches to peace processes that focus on particular “actors” (e.g. spoilers, third party interventions) and “technologies” (e.g. commitment mechanisms) provide some insights into the failure to achieve a lasting peace in the region, but that a full explanation requires consideration of two further issues. Firstly, formal peace processes are often embedded within wider developmental programmes and the tensions and interactions within this broader dynamic are important to understand. In Mindanao, while the formal peace process has moved towards explicitly addressing root concerns of the local population, the wider “peace through development” package promoted by the international community is, in fact, exacerbating many of the economic tensions behind the conflict. Secondly, in localized conflict such as Mindanao, it is important to examine the peace process within the broader political context of the country in question. In the Philippines, opposition to the peace settlement has, in recent times, been used for political opportunism by opposition forces at the national level. Similarly, for incumbent presidents, a return to militaristic solutions and associated nationalist agenda has been used as a way to shore up popular support in the rest of the country, undermining moves towards peace.

### **THE MODERN CONJUNCTURE: STATE AND CAPITAL IN THE PHILIPPINES**

While the “ethnohistorical” roots of the conflict in Mindanao can be traced to the precolonial era and the overlapping spread of Islam and European colonialism, the

political economy of the separatist movement finds its roots in the era of the American colonial administration in the Philippines—this despite the fact that the Americans were, in many ways, much more sympathetic towards the Muslims than their Spanish predecessors. While our focus in this section will be on the nature of the state that emerged in Mindanao over the *longue durée*, it is important to understand the nature of the Philippine state itself because it had important ramifications for the peace process.

The state that emerged in the Philippines under the Spanish initially relied overwhelmingly on the church for its legitimacy and its territorial control. Through a policy termed *reducción*, populations in the areas controlled by the Spanish were coerced into new settlements centred—politically and physically—on a church with a resident friar. While a secular administration did exist, based on a system of provincial governors and coopted local “big men”, known as *datu*, it was “weak in personnel... and it remained extremely dependent upon the friars for its most basic functions” (Abinales and Amoroso, 2005: 66). It was also highly corrupt. Moreover, the two systems of authority—secular and religious—were often in competition with each other. By the nineteenth century, Spain was attempting to implement reform in the Philippines towards a more typically bureaucratic state, but met with resistance from both existing arms of government in the colony. At the same period, a class of university-education *ilustrado* locals was emerging that had travelled to—and often studied in—Spain, where they had learned many Western liberal ideas, but also seen the relative weakness of Spain compared to its European rivals. On the back of the *ilustrado*, a nationalist movement emerged agitating for independence. Two key figures epitomize this movement: José Rizal, a Spanish educated novelist, poet and intellectual, whom Benedict Anderson dubs the “First Filipino” (Anderson, 1998); and Andrés Bonifacio, a man of more humble upbringing than Rizal, but more radical political agenda. Rizal formed an organization *La Liga Filipina* to campaign peacefully for political reform in the Philippines. Bonifacio joined *La Liga*, but was quickly disillusioned and formed a more radical secret society, *Katipunan*, planning armed struggle for full independence. This was reflective of a broader ideological split between the educated, elitist vision of the Philippines promoted by Rizal and later Aguinaldo; and Bonifacio’s populist atavism (Evangelista, 2002; Iletto, 1979). After an initial *Katipunan* revolt in Manila was discovered and put down by the Spanish in 1896, Rizal was tried and executed, but Bonifacio escaped. Subsequently, however, the *Katipunan* revolt—known in its latter phase as the Philippine Revolution—gathered pace beyond Manila, but its leadership turned on Bonifacio and he was executed by his own party. A more elite Filipino, Emilio Aguinaldo, replaced him. By this stage, however, Spain was separately embroiled in war with the US; after its heavy defeat in that war, the Philippines were ceded to the US in reparations. Aguinaldo responded by declaring Philippine independence and attempting to form a government but in a relatively short but brutal Philippine-American war, the US asserted its control over the territories.

Before turning to examine the American administration of the Philippines—which constituted the first time that Mindanao had been fully brought within the same



political structure as the rest of the Philippines—it is worth reflecting briefly on how this first generation of Filipino nationalists saw the position of Mindanao and the Muslim population within their “imagined community”. This is complicated by the fact that even among Filipino historians, remarkably little attention has been paid to Mindanao in the context of the Philippine Revolution. Within the writings of Rizal and Bonifacio, there is little evidence that they had seriously contemplated the problematic position of the Moro within the imagined Filipino community. While Rizal himself lived in Mindanao for a period under internal exile imposed by the Spanish, this was in the area already dominated by Christians and he did not address the Moro regions in his writings. The Katipunan manifesto that Bonifacio launched in exile in Hong Kong reached out to the Moro and urged them to participate in the uprising, addressing the Sultan of Sulu as his “brother”, but there was no attempt to recognize or reconcile the different historical and cultural traditions of the region in their conceptualization of an independent Philippines. While the Katipunan did recruit some membership in Mindanao, this was very limited and there is no evidence it stretched beyond the Christian areas (Evangelista, 2002).

Moro participation in the Philippine Revolution is likely to have been discouraged by two further features of the movement. Firstly, the popular interpretation of the revolution drew extensively upon Christian symbolism of martyrdom and suffering with Rizal painted by many as an explicitly Christ-like figure; a portrayal that remains popular to date (Ileto, 1979; Ileto, 1998). Secondly, even among the Christianized Filipinos, there was in many parts of the country a sense that the Katipunan was primarily an ethnically Tagalog movement. In Negros, for instance, anti-Spanish insurgents formed a separate Negros Republic that “affiliated with but did not become part of Aguinaldo’s regime” (Sturtevant, 1974:122). For the Moro, the heavily Christian nature of the revolution in particular made them wary, many seeing it as merely an extension of the hated Spanish regime.

American control over the Philippines came almost by accident as a result of its crushing victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898. While the US had initially been relatively supportive of Aguinaldo in the interregnum between the end of the Spanish-American War and Aguinaldo’s declaration of independence—Aguinaldo himself returned to the Philippines from exile accompanying by US troops—relations quickly soured and Congress ratified the US-Spanish peace treaty that transferred the Philippines to US control. Nonetheless, American policy was from the start concerned with whether to maintain a colonial presence in Asia, and if not how to “dispose” of the territories. Writing in the *North American Review* in 1898, before the Spanish-American War had even been resolved, the US diplomat John Barrett observed that America would have four options in dealing with possession of the Philippines—to maintain them as a permanent colony, to return them to Spain, to give them independence, or to sell them to another state—and that none was particularly palatable (Dilke, Barrett, and Lusk, 1898). US plans for Hispanized Philippines quickly settled on a slow transition to independence, but the status of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago within that process was a matter of heated debate in the US Government and the Philippines itself.

The state that emerged in the Christianized Philippines under American tutelage bore institutional resemblance to US-style democracy, with a bicameral parliament and a directly elected executive Presidency limited to two terms<sup>1</sup>, but the nature of political power in the country was highly localized. Political expediency led American administrators to collaborate with elite Filipinos whose power was largely based on control of the large hacienda estates and patronage network (Hutchcroft, 2000). As a result, come independence, democratic structures had already been subverted and local “big men” and their families dominated political positions and collected votes through extensive patron-client relationship as well as by more dubious means—the infamous “guns, goons, and gangs” of Filipino politics (Sidel, 1999). At the national level, ideological differences between the two main parties, the Liberals and the Nationalists, were scant; at the local level, private armies were common and more influential than political parties. As a result, neither party was able to attain lasting political domination and the presidency oscillated frequently between the two parties. In 1969, Ferdinand Marcos, who had been elected in 1965 on the Nationalist slate having defected from the Liberal Party the previous year, became the first Philippine president to win re-election. During his second term, Marcos began actively cultivating a personality cult and, with his final constitutional term expiring in 1972, he declared martial law—largely legitimized on the basis of the violence in the South (see below) as well as a wider Communist insurrection. Under martial law, the Philippine state became heavily centralized, with Marcos dominating the political structure. Although martial law was lifted in 1981, Marcos had secured a new constitution which not only allowed him to run for president again, but also to serve concurrently as prime minister. The assassination of Benigno Aquino, an outspoken critic of Marcos, fomented widespread opposition to Marcos. Marcos called snap presidential elections in 1986, in which Aquino’s widow, Corazon Aquino, ran. The official election body COMELEC declared Marcos the winner but this was contested by NAMFREL, a coalition of NGOs monitoring the election. Huge protests began—the famous People Power revolution—and after military leaders (notably Fidel Ramos, later himself president) backed the protestors and Reagan’s administration in the US withdrew its previously solid support for Marcos, Marcos fled to the US and Corazon Aquino was installed as president. A new constitution was drawn up that restored many of the democratic institutions of the pre-martial law era but limited the presidency to a single six-year term. To the surprise of many observers, however, the centralized period of the Marcos administration had not effectively broken the local power structures and the post-Marcos era has largely seen a return to the localized nature of political mobilization in the country (Abinales and Amoroso, 2005; Sidel, 1999).

State formation in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago took a very different trajectory. In 1903, a Moro Province was created and directly administered as a military regime by the US. Often vicious pacification campaigns were interspersed with efforts to secure collaboration of leading datu (local chiefs). By 1911, Moro Province was deemed pacified and transferred to civilian control. In 1916, the Jones Law transferred control to the Philippine legislature, bring the region under the de facto control of Manila for the first time, and a Bureau for non-Christian

Tribes created to manage the residual “Moro problem”. American politicians and academics alike began congratulating themselves that their policy was “acknowledged by all unbiased observers as a decided success” (Kalaw, 1919: 11).

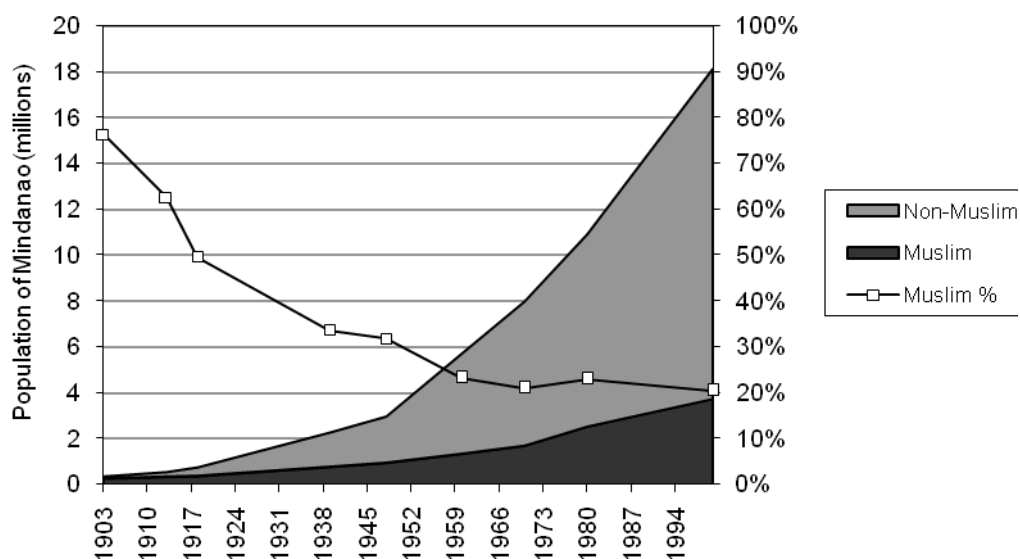
In ways that would ultimately feed into the political economy of separatism in the region, however, American policy towards Mindanao was in no small measure shaped by the undoubted potential of the island of economic development and resource exploitation. The island was sparsely populated and was endowed with rich natural resources. General John Finley, the second US governor of Moro Province, wrote in 1913 that “it has been clearly evident to the American army... that the regeneration of the uncivilized [i.e. non-Christian] tribes must be accomplished along industrial<sup>2</sup> lines” (Finley, 1913). Finley himself set up a series of trading markets or “Moro Exchanges” designed both to “teach” the Moros the value of economic activity and to encourage peaceful interaction between the Muslim and non-Muslim groups. He also developed a scheme to allow non-Christians to register land in their name for free up to 40 acres. This scheme, however, turned out to be the first step in a long process of land displacement of Muslims in Mindanao, for two reasons. Firstly, the scheme was in fact very poorly taken up due to the prevailing land customs in Mindanao in which land was sole held in usufruct. Explicit “ownership” of land was simply anathema to Moro traditions, even among the datu who, while holding power of arbitration in disputes over land use, did not even “own” the land themselves (Scott, 1982; Stewart, 1988). Secondly, while Finley congratulated himself extensively on this policy (Finley, 1913), the 40 acres that could be registered by Muslims was, in fact, far smaller than the acreage allowed to Christian settlers.

By the 1920s, the potential to develop Mindanao into a rubber economy was high on the agenda of US politicians and big business. In 1926, Harvey Firestone Jr., son of the founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, made an exploratory trip to the Philippines and is reported as having told President Coolidge on his return that “a fraction of the uncultivated acreage in the southern islands would, if developed, provide all the rubber needs of the United States”.<sup>3</sup> At around the same time, the Republican senator for New York, Robert Bacon, introduced a bill to Congress to separate once again the administration of the Moro Province from the rest of the Philippines. In promoting the bill in Congress, Bacon was explicit: belief in “altruistic” motivations for the continued US presence in the Philippines was self-delusional and America needed to secure “a permanent and controlled source” of food and raw materials. Separating Mindanao from the rest of the Philippines would “open the way for the production of rubber and other tropical articles by American capital”, and mean that even if the Philippines were granted independence, the US would maintain its interest in—and control of—the Moro Province.<sup>4</sup>

The Bacon Bill was not passed, but US capital remained interested in Mindanao for agricultural exploitation. American capital was ready to move into Mindanao, but exploitation required more than just capital—it required labour. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1928, the vice-governor general of the Philippines, Ralston Hayden, noted that “those regions [of Mindanao] which possess the most valuable natural

resources are the most nearly empty of inhabitants” (Hayden, 1928). For Hayden, the economic logic of settling these regions for economic development was “inescapable”; the question was who should settle there. Hayden left no uncertainty about his views on this. The “Moros and primitive pagans who [inhabit Mindanao] are neither capable nor desirous of developing [these regions]...[but] only a few miles northward of vacant Mindanao lies a group of Christian islands which are greatly overcrowded”. Hayden warned that the Moros must be allowed to “participate” in the development process, but argued that with a stable US policy in the region, good will and cooperation between the Moros and the Filipinos would grow and allow for the economic exploitation of Mindanao.

In fact, the colonial administration in the Philippines had already been actively encouraging Christian migration to Mindanao for over a decade by this stage. In 1917, the Philippine legislature set up a fund “for aid to such inhabitants of the provinces of Luzon and the Visayas as may desire to settle in Mindanao and Sulu” (Kalaw, 1919). Particularly around the Cotabato area, colonies were set up and migrants from across the Philippines settled there, taking advantage of the preferential land policies. By the 1920s, non-Muslims outnumbered in Mindanao and Sulu, although Muslims remained the majority on the west coast of Mindanao, the Zamboanga peninsula and the Sulu archipelago, as they do still (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).



After independence, however, the new governments in Manila began encouraging even faster Christian migration to Mindanao. During 35 years of American control, between 1903 and 1939, just short of 700,000 migrants came to Mindanao; during just 12 years between 1948 and 1960, more than 1.2 million Christian Filipinos migrated to Mindanao, an annual increase of 6.7% (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965). State-sponsored resettlement schemes, still with the ostensible aim of promoting agricultural production, brought thousands of poor Christians from Luzon and the Visayas islands to Mindanao (Abinales, 2000; Gutierrez and Borrás, 2004).

While under the Americans, migration had been encouraged to serve the needs of international capital, however, under the independent Philippines government in Manila, liberalization of land ownership restrictions combined with monopolistic laws on commodity exports to allow a number of politically-linked Christian families to accumulate vast plantation holdings. Given the political links and personal biases of their owners, these haciendas tended to employ Christian labourers at the expense of Moros (Che Man, 1990; Gutierrez and Borrás, 2004). Thus, not only were the Moro displaced from their “traditional” lands, they were also denied access to the emerging money economy.

By 1965, observers were already noting that Christian “penetration” of Mindanao was causing “unrest and strife”, with the dispute settlement processes usually favouring the Christians as “the better educated Christian has been able to present a stronger case to the courts... while Muslim litigants have been viewed as obstructionists and anachronists” (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965: 101). Some local Muslim leaders began making claims for separation, although Lela Garner Noble argues that until the 1970s, “Muslim leaders did not want to secede; they wanted rewards for not seceding” (Noble, 1975: 456).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, a series of events drove the politicization of Moro resentment towards the Christian state in Manila rather than the migrant population in Mindanao. The first of these was the “Corregidor Incident” or “Jabidah massacre” of 1968. Corregidor Island, in the Manila bay, was the site for the secret training of a group of Muslim volunteers recruited by the Philippine Armed Forces, apparently for a planned infiltration of the neighbouring Malaysian state of Sabah, to which the Philippines retained a territorial claim through its former status as a dependency of the Sultan of Sulu. In March 1968, the trainees mutinied and were massacred by their Christian officers. Whether this mutiny was caused by their perception that the planned “invasion” of Sabah was unjust or for the more prosaic reason that the recruits did not receive their promised pay-cheques is unclear, but whatever the reason, the massacre of Muslims recruits by Christian officers raised Muslim resentment against Manila (Noble, 1976; Noble, 1981). Shortly afterwards, the Muslim governor of Cotabato province, Datu Udtog Matalam, announced the formation of the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM), explicitly in response to the Corregidor Incident, although the MIM manifesto also asserted the theme of historical separateness elucidated above (Lingga, 2004).

Subsequently, in 1970, on-going disputes over land between Christian and Muslim groups broke out into fighting, with the Philippine Constabulary intervening on the Christian side. These fights themselves stemmed largely from the competing cultural perceptions of land, and thus the inability of the Christians and Moros to agree even on a suitable legalistic venue to resolve their disputes, “since there was no agreement on legal systems or judges” (Noble, 1975: 455). Fighting intensified as elections drew near and rival politicians mobilized ethnic and religious militias to gather votes and intimidate their opponents. In 1972, with his second and constitutionally final term as president ending, Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law, justifying it largely on the basis of the on-going violence in Mindanao. Martial

law in turn provided the trigger for the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which launched an armed movement for a separate Moro state. Funded by Libya and given logistical assistance by Mustapha Harun, Chief Minister of neighbouring Sabah, the MNLF was led by a charismatic lecturer from the University of the Philippines (UP), Nur Misuari, and brought together student radicals and the intelligentsia with Moro farmers displaced from their lands as well as religious leaders and local politicians. At this early stage, however, religion played only a minor role in the rhetoric and mobilization of the movement and the MNLF was oriented towards a Moro ethnic nationalism.

How far, then, was conflict in Mindanao inevitable? As we have seen, major protagonists on both sides, as well as American colonial powers, certainly saw conflict as if not inevitable then at least difficult to avoid due to Huntington-style “civilizational” clashes (Huntington, 1996). As early as 1908, the New York Times was reporting that many American colonial administrators “believe that if the islands, including the Moro Province, were given independence to-day, the Moros would conquer the northern islands in a year or two”.<sup>5</sup> Yet the socio-economic forces that drove the conflict were primarily linked to the ways in which successive regimes sought to open up Mindanao for integration into the national and global markets. Some American colonial administrators were certainly aware that incorporating Muslim groups into this process was an important aspect of “nation-building”. As we have seen, Rolston Hayden expressed this concern in the 1920s, while even earlier, Najeeb Saleeby—a local Muslim who became an influential collaborator within the American administration—argued that “a process of gradual development” was necessary in order for the Moros to “gradually rise in wealth and culture to the level of a democratic municipality” (Saleeby, 1913). Yet these warnings were not acted upon in opening up Mindanao for development. Whether or not a more inclusive development strategy would have prevented any conflict from emerging is, of course, rather too counterfactual to answer conclusively, but it certainly seems plausible to assert that there would have been considerably less support for secessionist claims in Mindanao if the Moro had been better integrated into the development process.

### **TRIPOLI, JEDDAH, KUALA LUMPUR: THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD TOWARDS PEACE**

In this section we examine the nature of and obstacles to the peace process in Mindanao. We focus here on the political process; in the next section, we examine the socio-economic dynamics of the peace. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the peace process in Mindanao is that while the insurgency has rumbled on at varying degree of intensity for almost four decades now, the basic framework of a peace agreement was worked out relatively quickly in the Tripoli Agreement of 1976 and while subsequent negotiations have sought to modify this agreement—either through its extension, particularly in terms of equalisation polices; or through its restriction, particularly in terms of territorial extent—none of the sides to the negotiations have entirely repudiated the Tripoli Agreement as the basis for a settlement. Certainly, the peace process has been complicated by the splintering of the separatist movement, first with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)

breaking away from the MNLF in the late 1980 and subsequently with the emergence of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Yet the role of “spoilers” (Stedman, 1997) in preventing the achievement of a lasting settlement has been, we shall see, only marginal. Instead, the obstacles to a lasting settlement have been primarily structural.

The first few years of the Moro insurgency from 1972 to 1976 were undoubtedly the most intense militarily, with thousands of fatalities on either side. By the mid-1970s, the conflict had descended into a military stalemate along classic guerrilla warfare lines: while the MNLF was not strong enough to rout entirely the might of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the latter was unfamiliar with the terrain, unable to break local supply chains and hence unable to destroy the MNLF militarily either. After 1975, however, both sides had greater reason to try to find a settlement. On the one hand, the ouster of Mustapha from Sabah state in Malaysia had denied the MNLF its primary conduit for arms and other supplies. On the other hand, Marcos was becoming increasingly concerned that Islamic countries in the Middle East were threatening to punish the Philippines out of sympathy with the Muslim insurgents by denying or restricting oil supplies.

Under the auspices of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), officials from the MNLF finally met with representatives of the Government of the Philippines, including Imelda Marcos, in Tripoli in 1976 and fleshed out a ceasefire agreement and the terms for a settlement. The sixteen point agreement covered political autonomy, defence and foreign policy, and administrative and fiscal structures but in all cases, the details of these arrangements were to be “fixed later”. What is noticeable about the Tripoli Agreement, however, is the extent to which its focus is primarily on the nature of political arrangements between the putative autonomous regime and the central government. While vague in its commitments, the Tripoli agreement constituted a set of political arrangements that appeared to be very generous towards Mindanao. The territorial extent of the autonomous region was agreed to include thirteen provinces which, while eight short of the 21 provinces that made up the MNLF’s declared Moro homeland of Mindanao and Sulu, also included eight provinces with that had a Christian majority population. The Muslims of the autonomous region were also to be guaranteed representation at the central level, including in the judicial branch right up to the Supreme Court level, and in “all other organs of the state”.

On economic matters, however, while the agreement allowed for the autonomous authority to have its own “economic and financial system”, there was no commitment to equalisation policies or land reform to address the prevailing horizontal inequalities within Mindanao and between Mindanao and the rest of the country. Indeed, the sole explicit developmental policy mentioned in the agreement was that natural resources and mining within the autonomous region would remain the competence of the central government; a “reasonable percentage” of revenues therefrom was committed “for the benefit of the areas of autonomy” but what constituted “reasonable” was left unspecified, as was the channel through which this disbursement would happen—that is, whether the revenue share would be

transferred to the new authority or whether it would be disbursed within Mindanao by the central government.

At the same time, the first major split in the MNLF emerged after Nur Misuari fell out with his deputy Hashim Salamat, who created the breakaway Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Three sets of issues appear to have influenced the schism. Firstly, after the failure of the Tripoli Agreement, Nur Misuari moved back to a more radical position demanding complete secession rather than autonomy; Hashim's MILF announced more limited demands for autonomy within the Philippines. Secondly, as the respective names of the organisations suggest, Hashim and his supporters were more committed to an Islamic notion of Moro autonomy whereas Nur Misuari had always emphasized Moro as a kind of ethnonational identity. Finally, and less publicly, the split reflected internal ethnic tensions between the Tausug who largely lived on the Zamboanga Peninsula and the Sulu archipelago and the Magindanao and Maranao, who lived on mainland Mindanao. Misuari was Tausug; Hashim Maranao. There are some suggestions that Marcos was well aware of these tensions and that acquiescing to an early peace in Tripoli was a strategic ploy to capitalize on these tensions, with Marcos' regime gambling that the longer the war dragged on, the more unified the Moro would become. While the preliminary negotiations for Tripoli were underway, Marcos announced that his government would not treat the MNLF as the sole representative of the Moro people and instituted a number of parallel negotiations with Muslim leaders who had not joined the MNLF (Yegar, 2002). The success of this strategy explains why Misuari and the MNLF agreed to a peace deal in Tripoli that did not seem to address the fundamental socio-economic marginalization of the Moro. Their fear was that without this deal, they risked eclipse as the major Moro power in the region.

The Tripoli Agreement committed the Government to "take all necessary constitutional processes for the implementation of the entire agreement" and, almost immediately after the agreement was signed, Marcos announced that this meant that the agreement required ratification in a plebiscite of the affected provinces. It is not entirely clear whether the MNLF had understood this clause to entail a referendum, but contemporary documents from the Philippines—together with their lack of public criticism of Marcos' announcement—demonstrate that, at any rate, they were not opposed to a referendum (Noble, 1981). While the MNLF may not have opposed a referendum in principle, however, differences quickly emerged over the wording of the questions that the referendum would pose. Intervention by the OIC failed to bring both sides to an agreement, and so after several delays, Marcos went ahead with his own version of the referendum questions. The MNLF's success in getting eight non-Muslim majority provinces included in the purview of the agreement proved its downfall; the referendum was decisively rejected. Marcos then created two new regional governments with very limited autonomy out of ten of the original thirteen provinces, and unilaterally declared the Tripoli Agreement implemented. Several senior members of the MNLF and other influential *datu* were induced to join the autonomous governments, reportedly gaining lucrative concessions in the process. The bodies that Marcos



created, the Autonomous Governments of Region IX (Western Mindanao) and Region XII (Southern Mindanao) were highly restricted in fund-raising powers and “could only pass resolutions addressed to [central government bodies] requesting action or appealing for aid without any legal sanction to enforce its measures” (Saideman Pangarungan, former Region XII assemblyman, quote in Che Man 1990: p.156). Moreover, the Tripoli agreement had mandated the creation of a single regional government, rather than the separate bodies that Marcos created. The MNLF cried foul and hostilities resumed.

After the People Power revolution of 1986, which received “strong support” from Muslim organizations in Manila,<sup>6</sup> Corazon Aquino began to pursue options for a peace settlement in Mindanao. Aquilino Pimentel, a Christian politician from Mindanao who had generally favourable relations with the Muslim population, was sent to Jeddah to negotiate with Misuari, who was then living in exile. Although this resulted in the signing of an accord between the MNLF and the new government, this accord did little more than agree to further talks, to be held in Manila.<sup>7</sup> Pimentel himself concedes that the agreement “did not amount to much”, although claiming that the location of the proposed talks was important as it constituted an “implicit admission [by Misuari] of the jurisdiction of the country over the issue”.<sup>8</sup> The talks themselves were also largely a failure. While the Aquino government was prepared to concede the principle of greater autonomy for the thirteen provinces in the original Tripoli Agreement, Misuari continued to push for all 23 provinces of Mindanao and Sulu to be included, as well as the maintenance of the MNLF as, in effect, a separate army for the region (Hernandez, 1988). Clearly, this was unlikely to be countenanced by the government in Manila, and the talks collapsed, although the MNLF did not return to armed combat.

Despite the failure of the peace talks, Aquino’s government pushed ahead with regional autonomy. The new constitution promulgated in 1987 expressly allowed for the creation of an autonomous regional government in Mindanao, subject to the formation a Regional Constitutional Commission. In collaboration with some of the local datu leaders (Bertrand, 2000), Aquino’s government went forward with plans for the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. In 1989, Congress passed a bill allowing for the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in up to thirteen provinces in Mindanao, subject to a referendum in each province. The extent of autonomy to be granted under the new act was much greater than that implemented by Marcos – including the creation of shari’a courts, genuine revenue-raising powers, and the establishment of a regional police force – but still ruled out any move to independence, stating that the ARMM would remain “an integral and inseparable part of the national territory of the Republic of the Philippines”.<sup>9</sup> Misuari and the MNLF rejected the referendum as a transgression of the Tripoli Agreement, and asked Muslims to boycott participation, as did the MILF. In the event, only four provinces with mainly Muslim populations voted for inclusion in the ARMM – Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. The ARMM thus came into being in 1990, but without the backing of either of the major separatist groups.

When Fidel Ramos replaced Aquino as president in 1992, negotiations with the MNLF were resumed in earnest, culminating in the 1996 Agreement on the Final Implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. The intervening years had seen the MNLF's support base largely drained as its rival splinter group, the MILF, built up its own strength; Ramos' insistence on negotiating first with MNLF—still recognized by the OIC as the “official” voice of the Moro—gave Misuari “renewed hope to recoup his shattered prestige” (Serajul Islam, 1998: 450). The agreement mandated the creation of a transitional Southern Philippines Council of Peace and Development (SPCPD) and committed the government to the expansion of the ARMM, both territorially and in terms of power within three years. The agreement also provided for the integration of demobilized MNLF guerrillas into the Armed Forces of the Philippines. At the same time, Misuari was appointed chairman of the SPCPD and agreed to run for election as governor of the existing ARMM in 1996 under the banner of Ramos' own party, which he won convincingly.

Despite the Ramos administration's assessment that he would prove an “excellent administrator”<sup>10</sup>, Misuari's governorship of the ARMM was marked by incompetence and allegations of corruption. As Bertrand (2000: 40) notes, even prior to Misuari's stewardship, the creation of the ARMM “provided an opportunity for the traditional *datus* to re-establish some of their political clout”. Misuari himself ran an administration that was profligate in “personnel” expenditure but not so forthcoming with development projects, despite massive investment in the region from both the central government and donor organizations such as USAID. In 1997, some 84 per cent of the ARMM budget was spent on “personnel services”, 14 per cent on “operating expenditure”, and just 1 per cent on capital outlays (Ibid.). Misuari's lifestyle as governor was notoriously lavish, spending over 20 million Pesos (approx. £200,000) of ARMM funds on his own travel in just nine months and he reportedly “pocketed funds allocated for the poverty alleviation programme”.<sup>11</sup> With disillusionment running high, the MNLF itself finally had enough and ousted Misuari as its leader in April 2001, although this did not affect his position as governor of the ARMM. With his term expiring later that year, however, Misuari's position looked bleak. Barely weeks before his term expired, Misuari announced a resumption of armed conflict against the Philippine state and attacked a police station together with a small contingent of still-loyal MNLF fighters. The attack was a failure and Misuari fled to Malaysia, where he was arrested for illegal immigration and, after some prevarication, deported back to the Philippines, where he now languishes in jail.

The start of the twenty-first century saw an upsurge in violence in the Southern Philippines, largely on the part of rebel groups such as the Abu Sayyaf which emerged during the 1990s apparently more intent on extortion and profiteering than “genuine” separatist struggle (Turner, 2003). Post September-11 analysts have also made much out of apparent links with Al Qaeda (e.g. Abuza, 2003), although the methodology and findings of these studies are disputed (Brown, 2006; Hamilton-Hart, 2005). These developments, combined with the abject failure of the ARMM in any of its manifestations to bring about a lasting peace or any kind of socio-economic development in Mindanao, has seen more protagonists of conflict

resolution in the Philippines turn to a radical new option: the complete transformation of the country into a federal state.

Foremost among the proponents of a federal solution was Aquilino Pimentel, the Christian Mindanao senator who negotiated with Misuari in 1986 and helped draft the original ARMM act. For Pimentel, “there is no other peaceful, feasible, constitutional solution to the problem than the creation of a federal state of the Bangsamoro, within a federal republic of the Philippines”.<sup>12</sup> Calls for the transformation of the Philippines into a federal parliamentary system have in fact been on-going for many years, but gained momentum in 2005 when the then president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo threw her weight behind the proposals and set in place a Consultative Commission charged with designing a federal constitution. The most ardent proponents of charter change have seen it as a virtual panacea for the Philippines political woes – a way of reaching a permanent settlement in the South and, more broadly, a way of reforming the national political system to break the stranglehold of big business and political clans over parliament and the government.

Arroyo’s declaration of intent was, however, regarded with scepticism by many quarters. Firstly, her proposed changes would have potentially allowed her to continue as a prime ministerial head of state beyond the end of her presidential term in 2010. Accusations of self-interest in proposals of charter change are not new. The single-term nature of the presidency under the 1987 constitution, designed to prevent the emergence of another Marcos, has meant that any president seeking to amend the constitution is often interpreted as seeking to preserve their own power. Both the Aquino and Ramos administrations stood accused of such when they proposed changes that would allow the president to run for a second term. Proponents of charter change had thus leapt on Arroyo’s ascension to the presidency after the ouster of Estrada as a chance to push for charter change. In 2001, house representative Constantino Jaraula argued that the timing was right for a constitutional debate because Arroyo was still qualified to run for the presidency in 2004 and hence could promote such changes without standing accused of self-interest.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, Arroyo herself only publicly subscribed to charter change after the 2004 election. Secondly, Arroyo’s declaration came at the height of a vote-rigging scandal after the revelation of a taped telephone conversation between Arroyo and the head of the election commission, made during the counting of the 2004 presidential election, in which Arroyo apparently exhorted the commission to ensure she won by at least a million votes. The charter change issue was thus viewed by some as an attempt to divert attention from her own political woes.

While Arroyo’s belated quest to transform the Philippines into a parliamentary system failed, her government’s direct negotiations with the insurgents were more effective. Her predecessor, Joseph Estrada who had been ousted in massive street demonstrations, had favoured a military solution to the conflict and had launched an “all-out war” on the MILF, by this stage the militarily dominant faction in Mindanao. The war resulted in massive casualties on both sides and the AFP overran the MILF headquarters at Camp Abubakar, but was not able to entirely

destroy its forces. When Arroyo replaced Estrada, however, she held out an offer of resumed negotiations, and the MILF quickly agreed. A framework for a peace process was worked out in Kuala Lumpur with the mediation of the Malaysian government in July 2001.

The subsequent peace process was slow and intermittently broke down with accusations of breaches of the ceasefire on both sides, but by 2008 finally produced an agreement, signed in Kuala Lumpur under continued Malaysian mediation. Unlike previous negotiations, this process had dealt with—and been bedevilled by—land issues, or what the MILF termed the issue of “ancestral domains”. The 2008 agreement, the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was, by any standards, an extraordinary agreement. In contrast to the vague principles of the Tripoli Agreement, it was exceptionally detailed and dealt with all manner of economic and juridical issues, including land and water resources, explicit revenue sharing formulae that heavily favoured Mindanao (75:25), and detailed explanation of the territorial extent and governance structure of the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE). The agreement even entitled the BJE to conduct its own foreign relations and committed the GoP to help the BJE seek representation on such regional bodies as ASEAN.

Indeed, such was the extent of the agreement that a coalition of Christian politicians from Mindanao and opponents of Arroyo in Manila petitioned the Supreme Court to issue an injunction preventing the Government from signing the memorandum on the grounds that it constituted *de facto* complete independence and was hence unconstitutional. In August 2008, the Supreme Court ordered a temporary restraining order preventing the signing of the document while it deliberated. The decision was followed by a resumption of violence in Mindanao, although the MILF maintained initially that this was rogue elements rather than an official withdrawal from the peace process. The Government responded by announcing that it would not sign the MOA-AD whether or not the Supreme Court endorsed its constitutionality, and in October 2008 the Supreme Court ruled that the document was indeed unconstitutional. The MILF and the GoP subsequently both officially withdrew from the peace process, and the military conflict resumed apace, with over 600,000 people displaced within a month.

In May 2010, Arroyo’s term as president concluded and she was replaced by Benigno Aquino III, the son of the assassinated Benigno Aquino and Corazon Aquino. Aquino quickly committed himself to resuming peace talks with the MILF, and Indonesia, Malaysia and Libya all expressed support and offered logistical assistance and mediation. As of writing, however, nothing has yet solidified from this.

In examining the political dynamics of the peace process, it is clear that the role of third parties has been critical, but not always beneficial. While both Libya and Malaysia initially supported the insurgency—the former openly, the latter more covertly—since the mid-1970s, they have both sought to contribute to a negotiated settlement by offering neutral venues trusted by both sides. For the MNLF and the MILF, this trust emerged from shared religious values in Islam. For the GoP, Libya

and Malaysia's position as members of the international community afforded them legitimacy as mediators who could not afford to be seen to be biased.<sup>14</sup> While outside intervention has facilitated negotiation when both sides to the conflict have sought it, however, they have not been successful in creating opportunities for negotiation or preventing the collapse of talks, with the exception of the initial period in 1975 when combined pressure from the OIC on the GoP and withdrawal of support for the MNLF from Malaysia forced both parties to the negotiating table. In 1982, Saudi Arabia attempted to force a resumption of talks by boycotting oil supplies to the Philippines, but Marcos' regime did not respond and after six months the boycott was dropped. While the intervention of the Muslim world has generally supported the peace process, Western involvement has been less beneficial, as detailed below.

Politically, two major stumbling blocks have hampered the peace process. Firstly, successive regimes in Manila have followed a political strategy of one-sided implementation of accords accompanied by the co-optation of individual members of the insurgent groups and other Moro leaders into these bodies and strategies that intensified internal divisions within the Moro, whether deliberately—as appears to have been the case in the Tripoli era—or accidentally—as was more the case in Ramos' selection of Misuari to lead the ARMM. While often successful in the short-term at reducing hostilities, this has ultimately undermined the peace process by generating distrust within the Moro community and a general sense of disillusionment towards their own leaders and the prospects for an equitable negotiated settlement.<sup>15</sup> Nur Misuari's inglorious end as the corrupt overlord of the toothless ARMM and the subsequent collapse of the MNLF epitomized this process.

Secondly, the peace process in Mindanao has become something of a political football in Manila. On the one hand, for successive presidents facing other political problems, a renewed offensive in Mindanao has often provided useful distraction. Marcos' initial declaration of emergency that enabled him to remain in power for another fourteen years was legitimated in part by the violence in the South, while both Estrada and Arroyo launched new offensives when their popularity was sinking. On the other hand, however, for opponents of incumbent presidents, peace negotiations have occasionally provided opportunities to score points against the administration by depicting them as betraying the territorial unity of the Philippines. The geographically restricted nature of the Mindanao conflict and the highly localized nature of the Philippines' "cacique" democracy (Anderson, 1998) has meant that it has rarely figured majorly in national political discourse unless summonsed there for the political advantage of elites contesting power in Manila, not Mindanao. This was particularly notable during the Arroyo administration, both in opposition to her proposed federalization of the Philippines and in the application to the Supreme Court to abrogate the 2008 MOA-AD.

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## IDENTITY, INEQUALITY, AND DEVELOPMENT: THE MORO IN THE UNITARY STATE OF THE PHILIPPINES

If conflict between the Moros and the Hispanized Filipinos was not demographically inevitable, it was certainly imbued with the appearance of inevitability during the colonial era as the Spanish sowed the seeds of intrinsically opposing identities between the Christianized indios and the Muslim moro. The term moro itself was, of course, a Spanish import from the Iberian peninsula where, at the start of the colonial era, the expulsion of the “moors” (moro) from Grenada was within living memory. In the Philippines, the Spanish used the term moro “to indicate a moral boundary against which Spanish evangelical mission, and therefore Castilian hegemony, could be organized and legitimized” (Blanchetti-Ravelli, 2003: 49). Key here was the promotion of the moro-moro plays mentioned above, a form of popular theatre that portrayed the Muslims as uncivilized heathens, bringing their religion by force with threats of unspeakable deaths, and the Christians as unbowed and ultimately victorious moral agents. Survey evidence from the early 1970s, on the eve of the conflict, suggests that the stereotypes promoted by the Spanish endured throughout the American era and independence (Lacar and Hunt, 1972).

Yet as noted above, the term “Moro” itself conceals a high degree of ethnic and linguistic diversity, as indeed does the term “Filipino” for the Christianized groups. **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.** provides the ethnolinguistic breakdown of Mindanao in 1990, based on census sample data. The three largest Muslim groups in Mindanao, the Maguindanao, the Maranao, and the Tausog, are relatively evenly balanced, each constituting just over a quarter of the Muslim population and around 5% of the population of Mindanao as a whole. They are concentrated in different parts of the region, however: the Maguindanao on the west coast of Mindanao; the Maranao in the northwestern provinces of Lanao; and the Tausog on the Zamboanga peninsular and the Sulu archipelago to the west of Mindanao itself. The largest Christian ethnolinguistic group, the Cebuano, constitute around a quarter of the population of Mindanao—larger than the entire Muslim population, although even this may hide a degree of heterogeneity, as Cebuano is a lingua franca for many different groups originating in the central Visayas archipelago.

Table 1: Ethnolinguistic breakdown of Mindanao

| Ethnolinguistic Group | % Pop. | Region of origin                             |
|-----------------------|--------|--|
| MUSLIM                |        |  |
| Maguindanao           | 5.0%   | Maguindanao (Mindanao)                       |
| Tausog                | 4.9%   | Sulu (Mindanao)                              |
| Maranao               | 4.7%   | Lanao del Norte/Lanao del Sur (Mindanao)     |
| Other Muslim          | 4.1%   |  |
| CHRISTIAN             |        |  |
| Cebuano               | 25.6%  | Cebu (Visayas)                               |
| Bisaya/Binisaya       | 18.1%  | Visayas                                      |
| Hiligaynon, Ilongo    | 8.4%   | Negros (Visayas)                             |
| Boholano              | 4.1%   | Bohol (Visayas)                              |
| Surigaonon            | 3.2%   | Surigao del Norte/Surigao del Sur (Mindanao) |
| Ilocano               | 2.3%   | Luzon  |
| Zambageno/Chavacano   | 1.9%   | Cavite/Zamboanga (Mindanao)                  |
| Other Christian       | 17.8%  |  |

The Spanish colonial project of constructing the Moro as a single community was, however, one that was taken up enthusiastically by the emergent separatist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Misuari in particular was adamant that the Bangsa Moro identity was one that transcended ethnic differences and, indeed, even held out the option that the primarily animist lumud tribes of the Mindanao highland were a constitutive part of the Bangsa Moro, despite not confessing Islam. Yet, as we have seen in relation to the Tripoli negotiations, internal divisions within the Moro community remained sensitive. Despite his earlier broad language for the Bangsa Moro identity, Misuari's period as governor of the ARMM was marked not only by corruption but by allegations that he sought to favour his own Tausug ethnic group over others, even within the Muslim community. Moreover, Mindanao has long been home to a tradition of small-scale inter-communal conflict within and between the Moro groups—rido, or "clan conflicts"—that have fed into the conflict dynamics in complex ways. On the one hand, the proliferation of arms in the region due to the secessionist conflict has intensified these local conflicts. On the other hand, case studies suggest that in some cases it is rido conflicts that often escalate into major confrontations between government and secessionist forces (Canuday, 2007). These factors have led scholars such as Thomas McKenna (1998) to conclude that the "Moro" nationalist identity promoted by Misuari and other secessionist leaders is one that does not resonate strongly with the rank-and-file membership of the secessionist groups, let alone other non-combatants.

While Misuari's economic policies as governor of the ARMM may have exacerbated internal ethnic tensions within the Moro community, however, the peace process has also been constantly bedevilled over four decades by the failure to achieve an agreed and effective set of policies to deal with land reform and equalisation. In many ways, this represents a continuation of the tensions evident in the late colonial era between American capital and local moral economies, but with the role of specifically American capital replaced in the contemporary era by the broader agenda of "liberalization" for international development.

The wider issue of land reform affects not only Mindanao but the whole country. In 1988, the administration of Corazon Aquino initiated a Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Package. While committed to redistributing land to smaller landowners, the package was flawed for a number of reasons. Firstly, it stipulated that remuneration would be required for the land redistributed, making it difficult for poorer people to claim land. Secondly, it deferred including commercial estates in its purview for ten years, subsequently extended for another ten years by Ramos. As a result, the actual amount of land redistributed under CARP was minimal and actually resulted in a higher concentration of land holding among commercial companies and multinationals.

In Mindanao this process was, ironically enough, exacerbated by Western donors' commitments to assist peace through economic development programme, because they tended to favour large scale commercial enterprises (often with international corporations involved)—with the presumption of employment generation—rather than redistributing land to landless Muslim farmers. Hence, for instance, the EU donated ₱ 13 million for the development of 13 rubber plantations in Mindanao covering over 500 hectares. More generally, and in line with Mark Duffield's broader critique of the "liberal peace" (Duffield, 2001), Western donor assistance to Mindanao—which has been bountiful—has tended to view market-oriented solutions, with an emphasis on export-oriented commodities, as the best ways to encourage development and, hence, reduce the grievances of the Moro population. Critical voices see donor "peace-building" engagement in Mindanao as little different from the US colonial era policy of shaping the region for the entry of Western capital.

## CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary analyses of peace processes, often quantitative in nature, tend to focus on a relatively narrow set of actors and variables to explain the success or failure of such processes (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003; Hartzell, Hoddie, and Rothchild, 2001; Walter, 2004). While these studies and methods allow important insights into the dynamics of peace, this paper suggests that we must also pay attention to the deep historical context in which conflicts and their settlements are located—something that is difficult to operationalize for quantitative analysis.

In the case of Mindanao, the kind of variables explored in quantitative analysis—the presence or absence of third party mediation and/or enforcement; the role of "spoilers"; the settlement of "grievances" in peace agreements—help explain the short-term dynamics of the peace process. But they do not sufficiently capture the underlying structural tension that has existed in the region since the days of the American colonial project between the attractiveness of the region for economic exploitation and the concomitant demands of capital and liberalization on the one hand; and, the local moral economies of a sparsely-populated and internally-divided indigenous population on the other hand. It is the surprising continuity of this tension, rather than the fluctuations in motive and approach of individual actors and groups, that explains why peace has been such a long and winding road in Mindanao.



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<sup>1</sup> A notable difference, however, was that the Vice President was elected separately from the President and hence often came from a different political party.

<sup>2</sup> Finley's use of the word "industrial" here is in a broad sense of economic activity—including agriculture—rather than the modern economic notion of "industry".

<sup>3</sup> "Philippine rubber production trivial up to date", *Baltimore Sun*, 8 Aug. 1926.

<sup>4</sup> "Bill to free Moros explained by Bacon", *Baltimore Sun*, 27 Jun. 1926.

<sup>5</sup> "Taming the Philippines", *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1908.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Aquilino Pimentel.

<sup>7</sup> *Joint Statements of the Philippine Government and the MNLFP Panels*, 4 January 1987, Jeddah.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Pimentel.

<sup>9</sup> *Republic Act 6734: An Act Providing for an Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao*, Art.3, Sec.1.

<sup>10</sup> "A cold warrior comes in from the cold", *Asiaweek*, 27 December 1996.

<sup>11</sup> "Nur Misuari: Has the 'good warrior's' long struggle come to a disgraceful end?" *The Philippine Star*, 16 January 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Pimentel.

<sup>13</sup> *House of Representatives, Journal of the House* no 16., 27 Aug. 2001

<sup>14</sup> Interviews, Manila 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Muslim activist, Manila 2010.